DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 171 EA 027 405

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TITLE Perceptions of High school Students and School Personnel toward Gang Activity, Violence, and Safety in the High Schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi.
PUB DATE Nov 95
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Biloxi, MS, November 8-10, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS High Schools; *High School Students; *Juvenile Gangs; *School Personnel; *School Safety; *Student Attitudes; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Hinds County School District MS

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined students' and school personnel's perceptions of gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi. The perceptions were measured against the student variables of grade level, age, gender, and race, and the school personnel variables of years of experience, gender, certification, and race. A total of 563 students and 38 school personnel responded to a survey, a 68 percent student response rate and a 93 percent school personnel response rate. Findings indicate that grade level, age, gender, and race had no significant effect on students' perceptions. Years of experience, gender, certification, and race had no significant impact on school personnels' perceptions. Tenth-grade students perceived the presence of gang activity in the district, while upperclass students had an impression of safety at school. White students perceived school violence as problematic. School personnel viewed gang activity and violence as a primary concern. One table is included. (Contains 71 references.) (LMI)

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Perceptions of High School Students and School Personnel toward Gang Activity, Violence, and Safety in the High Schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi

presented by

Dr. Janice E. Lewis Duncan

1995 Annual Meeting
Mid-South Educational Research Association
Biloxi, Mississippi

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Janice Elaine Lewis Duncan
Perceptions of High School Students and School Personnel Toward Gang Activity, Violence, and Safety in the High Schools of the Hinds County Public School District In Mississippi
Abstract
Educational Administration
Dr. Louise Jones
May, 1995

The purpose of the study was to determine the perceptions of students and school personnel concerning gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi. These perceptions of gang activity, violence, and safety were measured against the student variables of grade level, age, gender, and race, and school personnel variables of years of experience, gender, certification, and race.

A total of 563 students and 38 school personnel responded to in the survey entitled "Gang Activity in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District." The Student Survey and School Personnel Survey consisted of questions on their perception of gang activity, violence, and safety in their schools. There was a 68% return rate for students and a 93% return rate for school personnel. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS/PC) statistical program was used to analyze the data. A chi-square was used to compare the responses of students and

school personnel to determine if a significant difference occurred between groups. The criteria for rejection of all eight hypotheses was set at the .05 level of significance. Tables were developed that featured frequency counts and percentages.

There were eight hypotheses tested. Three were rejected at the .05 level. The other five hypotheses revealed that there were no significant differences in perceptions of gang activity, violence, and safety among most students based on grade level, age, gender, and race and no significant differences in school personnel perceptions of gang activity, violence, and safety based on years of experience, gender, certification and race.

Major research findings from the study included:

1. Gang activity in the Hinds County Public School District was perceived as present among students in the lower grade (10th grade).

2. The perception of safety at school was present among the students of the upper grade levels (11th and 12th-grades) of the Hinds County Public School District.

3. The perception of violence at school was present among white students in the Hinds County Public District. However, school personnel perceived safety issues as a main concern as associated with gang activity and violence.

There is a continuous need to develop strategies, policies, and other innovative interventions to curtail any level of violence.

Introduction

Gang research began in the United Stated cities with Thrasher's 1927 study of Chicago Gangs of the 1920s. (Moore, Vigil, & Gracia, 1983) The problem of gangs has been around much longer. Stover (1986) reported that the city of Philadelphia began having problems with gangs of young troublemakers as early as 1791, as did New York City in 1825.

In Boston, the school absorbed the tensions of a crime-ridden neighborhood. Drug wars were played out in the corridors. Intruders, identified as gangs, roamed through the building, settling scores with students between classes. Even teachers moved in groups, both inside the school and on the way to the Stop & Shop parking lot, where their cars were easy targets for vandals and thieves. (Terris, 1986)

In Los Angeles the public schools have become a focal point of gang violence. Many rival gangs clash with one another, they threaten other students with intimidations and extortions. Teachers also become victims of assault and demands for grade changes. These type of actions set the conduct for existing gangs across the country. (Schwartz, 1989)

Fleming and Moriarty (1990) reported that while there was a time when suburban school administrators felt gang problems only existed in urban school systems, this is not the case today. Tursman (1989) reports that two decades ago, gangs began to spread out of many cities with Los Angeles being identified as having a large number. Moreover, Stover (1986) reports that out of boredom, kids from so-called affluent gangs became increasingly involved in criminal activities.

The propagation of gang activity is having an adverse effect on our nation's schools.

According to Dr. Benjamin Canada, in his article in The Clarion-Ledger - Focus, p. 1, now Superintendent of the Atlanta Public Schools but at the time Superintendent of Jackson Public School District, stated, "the more time and money spent in our schools on metal detectors and security guards--all that adds up to less time and money spent on instruction. That means less time for learning, and that means less time for children to be prepared for the world that awaits them."

Fleming and Moriarty (1990), reporting on students being afraid to attend classes, related that the State of Illinois passed laws to create safe school zones. In these zones, penalties for the distribution and sale of weapons and drugs have increased. Evidence shows that students are arming themselves with weapons in order to create their own safe passage.

Nicholson, Stephens, Elder, and Leavitt (1985) have pointed out that since 1960, violent crimes committed by juveniles have tripled. Bullock, Reilly, and Donahue (1983) reported that in 1976 school-aged youth committed 100 murders, 12,000 robberies, and 204,000 assaults. Nicholson, et al. (1985) have suggested that the high crime rate will probably continue and spill over into the schools.

A 1976-1977 National Institute of Education (NIE) survey reported 282,000 students were physically attacked with one-half of students resulting in injury in a typical month. Smith (1984) stated that approximately 112,000 had something stolen by someone using force, the threat of force, or a weapon.

In 1978 the Safe School Study reported that approximately 8% of schools had a serious problem with crime and violence. In the National Crime Survey, it was pointed out that 465,000 violent crimes occurred in and around schools in 1987, even though the school-

aged population has decreased since 1982. (Menacker, Weldon, & Hurwitz, 1990)

Violence in the schools in the United States has not been limited to students. The National Institute of Education reported that in any one month, 12% of the teachers in our nation would have had something stolen. (in 1978) In 6,000 of these cases, the items would have been taken by force. Further, 120,000 teachers would have been threatened with injury, and 19% of the 5,200 who were actually attacked would have been required some medical attention. (Evans & Evans, 1985) A poll conducted by the National Education Association reveals that the problem had not gone away. (in 1983) The results of this poll indicated that 28% of all teachers in the United States had been victims of vandalism or theft; and 4.3% of those polled reported having being attacked by students. (Bauer, 1985)

The spread of gangs has changed with the methods of warfare and sophistication. Twenty years ago, turf battles were fought with knives, sticks, and broken bottles; today they have been replaced by Uzis and Magnums which are used to protect complex webs of drugs, robbery, and prostitution. (Tursman, 1989)

While much gang activity and violence center around drugs and its related vices, gangs such as the skinheads exist as hate movements against Jews and other minorities. (Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1988) Still others such as those described by Stover (1986) as affluent gangs were formed as a means of relief from boredom.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of students and school personnel concerning gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi. The perceptions by students of gang activity, violence and safety were measured against the variables of grade level, gender, age and race; and the perceptions of school personnel of gang activity, violence, and safety were measured against the variables of years of experience, gender, certification, and race.

Methodology

The population for this study consisted of 563 students and 38 school personnel in the Hinds County Public School District. Students in the 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grades were assembled voluntarily in the cafeteria at their respective high school and administered the instrument. School personnel, which included teachers and counselors, were administered questionnaires via the campus mailboxes. A return rate of 68% was achieved for the instrument administered to the students of Hinds County Public School District and a return rate of 93% was achieved for the similar instrument administered to school personnel. Data were collected through the administration of a survey entitled Gang Activity in the High Schools of the Hinds County Public School District for students and Gang Activity in the High Schools of the Hinds County Public School District for school personnel.

Discussion of Hypotheses

A primary null hypothesis and eight supporting null hypotheses were developed for this study. The primary null hypothesis assumed that there would be no significant differences in the perceptions of students toward gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County School District in Mississippi due to specific demographic characteristics, as measured by responses on the survey instrument.

The first supporting hypothesis assumed that there would be no significant difference in the perceptions of high school students due to grade when comparing their responses to the variables of gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi.

Chi-Square analysis of data revealed that there was a significant difference in reported frequencies of grade level by perceptions of gang activity and perceptions of safety by students. The null hypotheses were rejected.

The second supporting hypothesis assumed that there would be no significant difference in the perceptions of high school students due to gender when comparing their responses to the variables of gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi. The null hypotheses was accepted.

The third supporting hypothesis assumed that there would be no significant difference in the perceptions of high school students due to age when comparing their responses to the variables of gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi. The null hypothesis was accepted.

The fourth supporting hypothesis assumed that there would be no significant difference in the perceptions of high school students due to race when comparing their responses to the variables of gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi.

Chi-Square analysis of data revealed that there was a significant difference in reported frequencies of race by perceptions of violence. The null hypothesis was rejected.

The fifth supporting hypothesis assumed that there would be no significant difference in the perceptions of school personnel due to years of experience when comparing their responses to the variables of gang activity, violence, and safety in high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi. The null hypothesis was accepted.

The sixth supporting hypothesis assumed that there would be no significant difference in the perceptions of school personnel due to gender when comparing their responses toward the variables of gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi. The null hypothesis was accepted.

The seventh supporting hypothesis assumed that there would be no significant difference in the perceptions of school personnel due to certification when comparing their responses to the variables of gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi. The null hypothesis was accepted.

The eight and final supporting hypothesis assumed that there would be no significant difference in the perceptions of school personnel due to race when comparing their responses to the variables of gang activity, violence, and safety in the high schools of the Hinds County Public School District in Mississippi. The null hypothesis was accepted. A review of the hypotheses for this study and related data are presented in Table 27.

Table 27
Chi-Square Summary of Variables for Students and School Personnel

HYPOTHESIS	x^2	p
Hypothesis One		
Student Perceptions		
Gang Activity/Grade Level	7.292	.007*
Violence/Grade Level	2.86	.091
Safety/Grade Level	9.07	.003*
Hypothesis Two		
Student Perceptions		
Gang Activity/Gender	.056	.813
Violence/Gender	.604	.437
Safety/Gender	.005	.945
Hypothesis Three		
Student Perceptions		
Gang Activity/Age	.569	.450
Violence/Age	.267	.605
Safety/Age	3.40	.065
Hypothesis Four		
Student Perceptions		
Gang Activity/Race	.017	.896
Violence/Race	6.80	.009*
Safety/Race	2.94	.086
Hypothesis Five		
School Personnel Perceptions	.000	1.000
Gang Activity/Years of Experience	.000	1.000
Violence/Years of Experience	.007	.932
Safety/Years of Experience		
Hypothesis Six		
School Personnel Perceptions	.058	.451
Gang Activity/Gender	.000	.985
Violence/Gender	1.138	.286
Safety/Gender		
Hypothesis Seven		
School Personnel Perceptions	1.708	.426
Gang Activity/Certification	1.493	.474
Violence/Certification	1.65	.436
Safety/Certification		
Hypothesis Eight		
School Personnel Perceptions	1.090	.296
Gang Activity/Race	1.389	.065
Violence/Race	.00	1.000
Safety/Race		

*$p < .05$.

Results

On the basis of the results of the data analysis compiled in the survey instruments the following conclusions have been derived:

1. 28% of students in the lower level (10th grade) and 73% of students in the upper level (11th and 12th grade) did not perceive the presence of gang activity, gang related violence and safety related to gang violence as problematic in their schools.

2. In the category of students who agreed with the perception of gangs in their schools, 40.2% were male and 59.8% were female. In the category of students who disagreed, 41.4% were male and 58.6% were female. Therefore, both male and female did not perceive the presence of gang activity and gang related violence as problematic in their school. However, both male and female students did perceive safety related to gang violence as being problematic in their schools.

3. In the category of students who agreed with the perception of gang activity in their schools, 53.7% were younger and 46.6% were older. In the category of students who disagreed, 49.4% were younger and 50.6% were older. Therefore, both younger and older did not perceive the presence of gang activity and gang related violence as problematic in their schools. However, both younger and older students perceived safety issues related to gang violence as problematic in their schools.

4. In the category of students who agreed with the perception of violence in their schools, 37.6% were nonwhite and 62.4% were white. In the category of students who disagreed, 49.6% were nonwhite and 50.4% were white. Therefore, white students

perceived the presence of gang activity and gang related violence as problematic in their schools. However, white and nonwhite students perceived safety issues related to gang violence as problematic in their schools.

5. In the category of school personnel who agreed with the perception of gangs in their schools, 58.3% had under 20 years or more experience. In the category of school personnel who disagreed, 60% had under 20 years of experience and 40% had over 20 years of experience. Therefore, school personnel with under 20 years and over 20 years of experience did not perceive the presence of gang activity and gang related violence as problematic in their schools. However, school personnel with under 20 and over 20 years of experience perceived safety issues related to gang violence as problematic in their schools.

6. In the category of school personnel who agreed with the perception of gangs in their schools, 25% were male and 75% were female. In the category of school personnel who disagreed, 44% were male and 56% were female. Therefore, both males and females did not perceive gang activity as being problematic. Equal numbers of school personnel, both males and females, were divided in the issues of gang related violence. However, school personnel, both males and females, perceive safety issues related to gang violence as problematic in their schools.

7. In the category of school personnel who agreed with the perception of gangs in their schools, 60% held A type certification, 30% held AA type certification, and 10% held AAA type certification. In the category of school personnel who disagreed, 38% held A type certification, 54.2% held AA type certification, and 8% held AAA type certification. Therefore, school personnel that held A, AA, and AAA type certifications did not perceive

gang activity as being problematic. Therefore, regardless of certification held, school personnel did not perceive the presence of gang activity and gang related violence as problematic. However, school personnel, regardless of certification held, perceived safety issues related to gang violence as problematic in their schools.

8. In the category of school personnel who agreed with the perception of gang activity in their schools, 17% were nonwhite and 83% were white. In the category of school personnel who disagreed, 40% were nonwhite and 60% were white. Therefore, white and nonwhite did not perceive the presence of gang activity and gang related violence were problematic in their schools. However, school personnel, regardless of race, perceived safety issues related to gang violence as problematic in their schools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The following statements are based upon data from the study and therefore this study can benefit the district and state to develop strategies and mechanisms to successfully and effectively combat school violence and promote school safety in the school district. They should also consider policy development, staff development, workshops, seminars, and other intervention strategies to curtail or minimize any level of violence. The researcher offers the following recommendations relative to gang activity:

1. Get to know students. Develop good friendly relationships with students. Help problem children develop positive relationships with teachers and other adults.

2. The district should set up a gang education program for elementary students. By educating young people about the dangers of gang membership, possible gang recruitment

efforts should be less effective.

The researcher offers the following recommendations relative to violence:

1. Review discipline rules with students and staff, set high standards, and model appropriate behavior. Send positive messages to students: "We care about you." "Take care of yourself and each other." "We go to class."

2. Invite police or criminal justice experts to teach administrators and staff how to deal with violent youth and adults. Learn how to handle someone who wields a weapon.

The researcher offers the following recommendations relative to safety:

1. Assess the school's vulnerability to potential security and other problems. Eliminate hiding places and install door alarms and other security devices. Use coded alerts over the public address system and be sure every room is equipped with an intercom telephone or two-way address system. Be sure all visitors are escorted to and from their destinations.

2. Provide security training for employees and develop a school wide security manual which applies to all types of emergency situations.

Recommendations for Further Study

The researcher makes the following recommendations for future research based upon the data and findings from this study:

1. A replication of this study should be carried out using the entire population of each primary and secondary school in urban areas where criminal behavior and gangs may be more prevalent.

2. A study similar to this one should be carried out to determine community perceptions concerning gang activity, violence, and safety in the Hinds County Public School District area. Findings could be used to determine if school and community concerns are similar.

3. A survey of community residents, businesses, and religious groups needs to be conducted to determine if and how they are willing to help with safety concerns.

4. A study of gang activity at the elementary school and junior high school levels needs to be conducted.

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